

The Principal's Office

I attended a school where discipline was regular, consistent and strong.

It seemed there were penalties for a million different things.

If you talked in class you would have to stand in the middle of the quadrangle, unless it was raining and then you could stand on the veranda.

Because I always seemed to find myself in talkative groups, it often meant that, by the end of a double lesson, there would be more students in the quadrangle than there would be left in the class room.

If homework was late or incomplete, you would spend all your breaks at the desk placed right outside the staff room, until everything was up to date, including the additional work my teachers loved to assign.

Dropping even one piece of rubbish would, if witnessed by a staff member, mean that you would spend your breaks cleaning up rubbish in all the most disgusting places that the teacher on duty could dream up.

Messing up in class meant carrying out “physical jerks” at break time.

I never really worked out if the jerks referred to the exercises, or to the students doing them.

And then there was a whole group of offences which were deemed to be more serious, because they brought the good name of the school into disrepute.

It was drummed into us that, whenever we were in uniform, even travelling to and from school, we were representatives of the school, and that everything we did while in uniform, was a direct reflection upon the school.

Consequently, behaviour that was deemed to be too loud, too vulgar, socially inappropriate or disrespectful of others, always earned the most severe punishment – being sent to the principal's office.

Every detail of that experience is indelibly etched into my memory.

Firstly, the principal would be informed by phone that you were on your way.

This left no loopholes, no chance for escape.

You knew that if you tried to delay the inevitable, and loitered on the way, your punishment would be even greater.

It seemed that the distance between wherever you had been caught and the principal's office would increase according to the amount of guilt your conscience was registering.

Everyone you passed on the way appeared to have foreknowledge of your wrongdoing, and the words went before you like a wave – the principal's office, the principal's office.

Even your footsteps seemed to take up the chorus.

And finally you reached the last corridor.

To this day I'm convinced that it was longer than the whole outside dimensions of the administration building.

It also seemed unusually dark and gloomy and no outside noises seemed to penetrate.

There was just the sound of your reluctant footsteps carrying you towards inevitable doom.

Even when you reached the office door itself, the agony was not over.

You had to stand there, hands behind your back, for as long as it took for your name to be called.

Praying for the bell to ring wouldn't help either, as the principal expected you to wait until you had been dealt with.

No exceptions, ever.

You could never be exactly sure what lay in wait for you inside the office; but you could be sure you weren't going to like it.

Looking back, I think the waiting was the worst part, especially if other students came out in tears while you were waiting.

Occasionally parents came out in tears.

That's when you really didn't want to be the next name called.

While you waited, you had time to think about what you'd done and to recall all the horror stories of how similar lapses by others had been punished.

By the time you were ushered into the office, you had convinced yourself that you would be lucky to escape with your life.

But when I was in Grade 9, something happened that totally changed the way that I viewed those dreaded trips to the principal's office.

The responsibility for all disciplinary action became the responsibility of the deputy principal, who just happened to be my mother.

Suddenly everything changed from my point of view.

I would love to report that from that moment on I became a model student who never again faced discipline, but that would be far from the truth.

Instead, whenever I did find myself in trouble, I knew that I would be dealt with by someone who really loved me and who had my best interests at heart.

Now the corridor wasn't so long, or dark or scary, and I no longer feared that I was flirting with death.

I also developed a real desire to stay out of trouble because I didn't want to see the look of disappointment on my mother's face.

You know, God is a little like that.

He loves us with the most amazing love and really wants us to make good choices.

At the same time, He knows that we will often get it wrong, and because He is righteous, He cannot just let our sin go unpunished.

He chose to pass the punishment which should have been ours onto His own son, Jesus, who was totally innocent.

And because Jesus was so filled with love for us, and because He knew that the punishment which we deserved would kill us, He accepted suffering in our place.

Today we have the opportunity to thank Him for that.

As we share this bread together, let's give thanks that Jesus was willing to allow His body to be broken to purchase our freedom.

What an awesome God.

Let's eat together with thanks.

As we take the cup, it reminds us that it cost Jesus His blood, for us to be forgiven.

Let's drink together.